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## RECITATION AND STUDY

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J. L. MERIAM  
The University of Missouri

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Not long ago a parent remarked to me: "My boy is accustomed to claim considerable of my time and energy each evening helping him in preparing his lessons to be recited at school the next day. It seems to me it would be much more helpful to the boy and more satisfactory to us parents if the teachers would do the teaching at school and let us hear the recitations at home." The feeling of this parent is probably shared by many who give the school work serious thought. Such an attitude is not one of irascible complaint, but is merely that of frankly questioning the effectiveness of teaching as commonly conducted in our public schools.

I have no desire to quarrel with the traditional school. The school of the past has contributed too much to the school of the present to allow one to be at all unappreciative of what has been done. Yet the past had its problems; and so has the present. It is in the interests of more effective school work that I wish to consider the function of the class hour. The question is: How can the teacher do most for the pupils while they are in class?

In the traditional school, and indeed in most schools at present, the class hour is the recitation period. School work in any subject is usually divided into three parts, occurring in the following order: (1) assignment by the teacher; (2) study by the pupil (at his seat or at home); (3) recitation by the pupil to the teacher. These three parts rest upon three principles tacitly assumed: (1) that the first work of the teacher is to determine the character and scope of the lesson to be studied by the pupil—to prescribe this for the pupil exactly as the physician prescribes medicine for his patient; (2) that the pupil derives his chief benefit from private study of the lesson assigned—except as he can profit by the considerate

helpfulness of some one aside from the teacher; (3) that the effectiveness of the pupil's study must be tested very frequently by a sort of examination usually known as the recitation.

The making of assignments undoubtedly fails to receive its due attention. In the first place assignments are usually given at the close of the recitation period, and at that time are liable to be hastily given. Too many teachers see in the assignments nothing of a serious problem in study, and so make them most easily, not to say carelessly. For example:

Study definitions and rules on page 86-87, and work out the exercises on pages 87-88. Bring in on paper the last four problems.

Again,

Read the next ten pages in the text; also, one of the following references: . . . .

Bring in a map, drawn by yourself, showing the location of the two armies at this time.

There are three very serious objections to that sort of assignment.

In the first place, the textbook cannot be assumed to be, as is claimed for patent medicine, suitable to all without an analysis of individual cases. It has been used to a very large extent in just this way. But it consists of a logical arrangement of subject-matter, excellent for ready reference, but not necessarily suited either to individual students or to individual lesson units. If the teacher has his own problems to be worked out through the text, the text cannot be assumed to be an all-sufficient guide. Yet it is easy to let a mechanical textual assignment crowd out the more difficult but more profitable assignment of a problem suited to the needs of the class.

Just here is the second serious objection to such assignments, viz., the demoralizing effect on the teacher. Real teaching rapidly deteriorates under such conditions. If there is one influence tending to make teaching mechanical and empty, it is found in the assignment given as a mere task rather than for the purpose of working out an important problem.

The third objection to the formal textbook assignment is the unwholesome influence on the attitude of the pupil, who too frequently feels that such an assignment is only an arbitrary

task in the daily grind of school work. Why should the facts related in these ten pages be learned? Of what consequence to him is the working of the exercises on pages 87 and 88? With such questions in mind, how small the inspiration to study vigorously!

Teachers are frequently in error in giving no attention to what the pupils do between the time of the assignment and the next meeting of the class. I recently asked about three hundred high-school pupils to answer in writing two questions: (1) What was the assignment for this class? (2) What did you do in studying the lesson assigned? The reports reveal a deplorable condition. They show, first, that the teacher's assignment made no very definite impression on the pupils. This part of the teacher's work must be judged not so much by his actual assignment as by the impression he makes on his pupils. In her book on *The Nature of Logical Study* Dr. Earhart shows how empty is this study by most pupils. One needs only to examine closely the work of one's own pupils to be led to see how ridiculous, if not how pathetic, are the efforts of pupils to study. They read the lesson; they learn the facts; they make outlines; they "think"; but beneath all one cannot but feel that most pupils are doing in a merely perfunctory way what they anticipate will be required of them in the recitation. The pupils must not be blamed. They usually meet the standard set by the teachers. Most pupils in our public schools do very little really hard work upon assigned lessons. And why should they do more? There is no strong motive for doing so. The pupils feel no problem inviting them to study. Their only incentive to study is to prepare for the rather formal recitation in the class hour.

Here is a third serious error on the part of many teachers, viz., devoting practically all the class hour to hearing the recitation. What is the function of the recitation, as such? It is evidently largely used as a means of testing the efficiency of the pupil in his study. A good recitation is evidence of good application on the part of the pupil. A poor recitation frequently provides the teacher with an opportunity of "explaining" the subject. We must not overlook the value of oral

recitation before one's classmates. But the thoughtful man cannot but ask if the teacher is doing most for his pupils by assigning them tasks and then merely testing their ability in terms of that assignment. In assignment and recitation there is little opportunity for teaching. Yet many teachers are on the lookout for the times when students stumble as *the* times to teach, to assist by means of "explanations."

In concluding this brief criticism of the traditional method of work, I cannot but approve of the conclusion of the parent cited at the opening of this paper, that *the present arrangement of school work throws the burden of actual teaching on someone other than the teacher, while the teacher serves mainly as the one who tests the student for advancement made.* Assigning tasks and then testing their performance by means of recitation is not teaching. Our traditional schools make little if any provision for real teaching.

In contrast to the method just described, in which recitation largely dominates in the class period while study is carried on almost wholly outside of the class, let me state my position rather abruptly: *Recitation may well be reduced to a minimum if study begun under the teacher's direction be increased to a maximum.* There may be found here and there some theory and some practice in line with this position. McMurry's *Method of the Recitation* and also some texts inductively arranged suggest study as a part of the class hour. In the practice high school conducted by the School of Education at the University of Missouri, considerable emphasis has been laid, for the past four years, on the importance of the larger portion of the class hour being spent in study under the direction of the teacher. The work is greatly handicapped by the inexperience of the teachers, but the results justify the emphasis on this method of work. Our plan is to spend approximately one-third of the class hour in recitation, then the larger portion of the remaining time on study, reserving sufficient time at the close for definite assignment. In practice, however, there is a decided tendency to dwell upon the recitation and allow too little time for study of the advanced

lessons. Until teachers become accustomed to this change of emphasis, much direct attention to the time element is needed. A vigorous adherence to this policy soon brings both teacher and student to find more interest and more profit in class study than in class recitation.

Our discussion of this plan of class work may be taken up under the same topics as were used in the adverse criticism of the traditional plan: study, assignment, recitation.

It is not intended that class study shall be substituted for home study. Rather, it is proposed that this class work shall prepare the pupil for more effective home study. Just here is a danger against which teachers must be on their guard. Pupils are prone to feel that if four propositions in geometry have been studied in class they need not be studied further at home. But class study must not go into the full details. It must lead the pupil to face the problem, to see the method of attack; then leave to the pupil the completion of the study at home. The method of class study must be the best method of home study, except that the class is working together under the direction and inspiration of the teacher.

One great result of class study is thus the training in right habits of study. This is the highest type of teaching. Reference was made above to the fact that pupils actually do not study much alone. This is not because they are not able or not disposed to study, but simply because they have not yet learned how. Even adult teachers are far from the mastery of the art of study, but their acquaintance with the subject-matter and with possible problems gives them an advantage.

What do we mean by study? A boy comes to a small stream. He wishes to cross it. He faces a real problem, that of freeing himself from an unsatisfactory situation and placing himself on the other bank, so that he may proceed on his course. He must now devise ways and means to this end. This is study: a conscious mental effort to acquire the means to accommodate himself better to his environment.<sup>1</sup> The usual

<sup>1</sup> For further consideration of the factors that enter into study, see Professor F. M. McMurry's *How to Study*—a most valuable contribution to pedagogical literature.

assignment fails to present such a real problem to the pupil. It was noted above that one of the most glaring defects in the supposed study by pupils is the lack of a definite problem in the lesson assigned. In the traditional school this problem may be formally stated: for example,

Read pages 104 to 112 to see what contribution the Albany Congress made toward effecting a closer union between the colonies.

But the mere statement of such a problem is usually meaningless to public-school pupils until under the teacher's guidance they have been led to raise questions for themselves. To prepare for studying the Albany Congress as a lesson in history, the pupil must be led to wonder what was the unsatisfactory situation among the colonists that called for such a congress. Why do boys wish to "get together" when a scheme for mischief or for service is being planned? What are some of the conditions necessary for union in purpose and effort? In what frame of mind must a boy be to yield readily to the will of the majority? Such questions, especially those of a practical nature, applicable to the pupils themselves, put the pupils into an inquiring frame of mind. This is the very basis for study. It takes time and skill, especially in treating our rather formal school subjects, to bring the pupils into that frame of mind. The initial step in such a process must not be expected of immature pupils. Here is the test of teaching. To select historical data to be studied calls for no great ingenuity on the part of the teacher. Merely to acquaint themselves with such data requires little work by the pupils. But finding in such data an essential problem and leading the pupils to realize its importance gives to the class hour a character seldom found in public-school work.

I cannot but maintain at this point that in following our stereotyped course of study found in most public schools it is difficult, if not impossible, to lead the pupil to a problem which seems to him worth studying. For example, the usual high-school text in mediaeval and modern history includes several pages descriptive of the reigns of several of the kings of France immediately after the Norman Conquest. I do not won-

der that second-year pupils find such history uninteresting and unprofitable. In such cases we must expect the problem to be perfunctory and the pupil to go to his study with no impetus for vigorous application.

After real class study the pupil is ready for the assignment. This is no longer in terms of pages or exercises. Such an assignment as this may be made for a lesson in history:

1. Find further evidences that the colonists were in need of a closer union.
2. Arrange all this evidence into a convincing argument.
3. Supplement the text by at least one good illustration of efforts to secure a closer union in some phase of present life.
4. Read pages 112-16 and 120-26 in the text for information as to the attitude of the colonists immediately following the Albany Congress. (This is in anticipation of "class study" at the next meeting of the class).

Such an assignment is not new material for the pupil. It is required only to supplement the study already done in class. Now, not only the increased interest in the problem itself, but the demand of the teacher for a higher standard of work, leads the pupil to apply himself more assiduously to his task.

It was asserted above that if the efficiency of study under the teacher's direction were raised to a maximum the importance of recitation could be reduced to a minimum. In many schools the schedule seems to indicate that the pupil is expected to devote from as much to twice as much time in preparation for a lesson as is spent in class-room recitation. Under such a schedule, and with the usual type of assignment, it is no wonder that recitations, as such, are so poor and consume so much time. How many minutes are needed to give a rigorous demonstration of four propositions in geometry, *if* the preparation has been well done? I must not be misinterpreted as detracting from the value of the recitation. On the contrary, I am endeavoring to insist that the standard of the recitation be greatly raised. Oral recitation under the impetus of natural competition among fellow-students is a most wholesome exercise. But the recitation must rank as subordinate to study in its value to the individual.